The Stage and Its People

Oscar Shaw and Jane Richardson in "The Rose of China"

Dorothy Dalton in "Aphrodite"

Helen Westley in "The Rise of Silas Lapham"

Billie Burke in "Caesar's Wife"
Photo © Alfred Cheney Johnston

Die Quinn-Palace

Jane Burr — East-West Players
Photo © Campbell

As We Were Saying—

By Heywood Broun

AMERICAN melodrama, it seems to us, is beginning to lose the fine edge of its speed. It may be merely the growing disillusionment of an old playgoer, but the writers of to-day do not begin to stir us as much as those of former years. We are inclined to think that the producers of to-day burden their melodramas overmuch with scenery and costumes. In trying to make the unreal convincing they are losing the atmosphere of never never land, which is so important to good melodrama. It should be a naive product. If any inconsistency creeps into the plot the last thing the melodramatist should do is to stop and argue about it. His best remedy is merely to arrange another murder or robbery and make the audience forget.

A great many of the modern authors and producers are not content to do this. They are beginning to ask us to take their melodramas seriously and to believe in them. They even want us to accept the people in their plays as authentic flesh and blood, and the first act, which used to contain at least one shooting, two bomb explosions and a riot, is now given over to careful exposition of character. We have "The Son-Daughter" of George Scarborough and David Belasco specifically in mind. It is perfectly true that Mr. Belasco has managed to make the play take on all the dignity and importance of tragedy at times by the striking and elaborate nature of the setting, but in gaining a glint of tragedy he has frequently smothered the more garish blaze of good melodrama.

Most of our plays to-day are too cheerful. After all there is enough joy and happiness in the world without having to go to the theater to seek it out. The average theatergoer leaves his apartment in the evening because it is too delightfully comfortable. Evidences of wealth and well-being are all about him, and they grow distracting. He needs rest and relaxation. When he goes to the theater what does he find? More joy and gladness. Everything always turns out for the best. The heroine gets the man she wants, the old inventor's patent potato peeler is sold for $50,000, gold is discovered in the apple orchard—in fact, fortune smiles upon every one.

There is little diversion in this for the tired business man who has been making money all day. In fact, he is rather apt to resent the injudicious frankness of the theater in giving away the secret of just what an easy and simple matter it is to attain success. No, if the theater is to be a place of diversion for us all it should show us fate in its meaner moments. True love should be blighted. Fame and success elusive. If we are to be lifted out of our own comfortable and easy going lives the stories selected for our entertainment should be grim and sordid. After a last act, in which the heroine has died dismally and the rest of the family has been ejected into a blinding snowstorm, we can all go back to our flats with a renewed interest and zest in life. These are the plays which make it possible for us to endure rocking-chair lives.

Dr. John Roach Straton, the minister who recently drew a blanket indictment against the theater because of its bedroom farces, is again up in arms against the immorality of the stage. The character and quality of his criticism can be best judged perhaps by a quotation from the sermon which he preached last Sunday at the Calvary Baptist Church. In speaking of a recent meeting of clergymen and actors at the Church of the Heavenly Rest Dr. Straton said:

"The most dramatic incident occurred when one of the Jewish rabbis was speaking, seemingly making some veiled reference to my letter declining to attend. In addressing the mixture of actors, actresses and preachers he dramatically lifted his hand and exclaimed 'We are all the children of the God of light.' As soon as he had finished that exclamation every light in the building went out and they were left in pitch-black darkness.

"My friends, was this a mere coincidence, or was it a deliberate rebuke from God and an indication of His displeasure at any such mixing up of the corrupt stage of to-day with His pure and holy church?"

We'll say that it was a mere coincidence. All too often in the theater there have been moments ever so fitting for a bolt of lightning to come through the roof and strike some particularly poor player. Ingenues, leading men, heavies and juveniles before our very eyes have given performances that were an offense to heaven, but instead of the quick avenging bolt nothing worse happened to the erring ones than a line in "The Times" the next day that Miss So and So was not quite as good as Laurette Taylor in that type of play. And in such punishment we have always failed to identify the hand of God, for we have never felt that the dramatic pages of "The Times" were authentically inspired.

No, we must say that Dr. Straton gives aid and comfort to agnostics and atheists if he is going to take the attitude that God closely scrutinizes the dramatic affairs of New York and withholds interference until such moment as there shall arise a situation which shall appeal to His sense of dramatic values. What a pitiful conception of God is this which Dr. Straton furnishes us. A deity waiting in the wings of the world with Aristotle in one hand and Clayton Hamilton in the other, patiently biding His time until He can strike terror to the evildoers of the theater and at the same time violate one of the dramatic unities!

From the superstitious men and slanderous who assume the right to call upon God to support them in their petty prejudices, good Lord deliver us!

Broadway's Latest Star, Lenore Ulric, Places Naturalness Above All

In the big star dressing-room adjoining the greenroom at the Belasco Theater Lenore Ulric received a representative of The Tribune last night. It was her first interview since she became a star in the title rôle of "The Son-Daughter." The ordeal of the opening night had been forgotten, and as she applied the make-up which changed her from a Caucasian to a Mongolian personality she answered questions with the enthusiasm of a débutante.

"What a lot of ambitious young women would like to be where you are sitting at this moment!" began the interviewer.

"I suppose so," smiled Miss Ulric. "Most of them, I am sure, have even a better chance than I had to get here. My meeting with Mr. Belasco came about through a letter which I wrote to him, begging him to come and see my performance in 'The Bird of Paradise' at the Standard Theater. It was only a few years ago, and yet it seems a long, long time since that never-to-be-forgotten moment when I realized from the stage that he had complied with my request and was actually there to see me.

"Something in my earnestness to succeed appealed to him, and he came. The human element in the situation stirred me, and I played as though my life depended upon the result. I won. This proved to me that the greatest thing in acting, as in any art, is to be human.

"If you play a working girl, do not wear patent leather pumps because your feet are small and don't bedeck yourself in filet lace just because you have it. Then, again, if your rôle is that of a woman who has suffered and who has passed through hours of anguish, racked by anxiety, as does Lien Wha in the last act of 'The Son-Daughter,' don't give her carmined lips, bleached lashes and an immaculate coiffure.

"When you have a chance to be bright and girlish, be bright and girlish. When you are called upon to portray a splendid woman, be splendid. But if you accept a part which is unprepossessing, just plain or merely unattractive—be what your character calls for.

"The portrayal of human character is the whole essence of acting, and the girl who is not willing to sacrifice at times the vital beauty that God has given her in youth will find that the artistic deity will deny her anything to take the place of, or glorify, what once was her beauty when it is gone.

"Personally I like character rôles best. You see, a character rôle is very decided; it calls upon you to give a picture that is strong, and there must be something elemental about such a part. And I like strong people." The man or woman who hates or loves vividly and enthusiastically always appeals to me, so I have a very great sympathy for these elemental people that I present in the plays that have fallen to my lot."

Mildred Holland Tells How a Speaking Voice Should Be Developed

Mildred Holland, one of the authorities on voice placing for the speaking stage, interviewed on its development, in her studio in the Metropolitan Opera House Building, had this to say:

"A well developed speaking voice is a rarity, even among the best speakers. To be able to project the tone, which must be round, full and clear, to the furthermost ends of any auditorium used for that purpose it is essential that the speaker must have perfect breath control. Hence the control of the diaphragm is absolutely essential, for that is the very foundation upon which the speaking voice rests. Simply filling the lungs with breath is insufficient, and audiences labor in sympathy with the effort of the speaker, whose intaking of the breath becomes audible and painful. Spectators wonder why they are so tired and exhausted after listening to a speaker whose efforts have been so apparent.

"To produce clear-cut enunciation, the teeth should be opened sufficiently to allow the vocalized sound to be projected without being impeded by the teeth being too closely held together. The lips and tongue also are an important factor, especially the upper lip, which is usually held more or less dormant by many speakers. This is inclined to muffle the sound.

"To speak English, the tongue must be under perfect control. Because English is the language produced the furthest forward in the mouth, it is absolutely necessary to have the lips, jaw and tongue under perfect control. The chief beauty of the English language lies in giving the vowels their full value, touching the consonants sufficiently to carve each word clearly and distinctly.

"We must never lose sight of the fact that the words are only the means of conveying the idea or message we have to bring to our audience. The message is the soul—the words but the body which clothes that soul. As we desire a beautiful body in which our souls may dwell, so should we desire to clothe our ideas with the most beautiful covering possible to give them by choosing our words correctly and then to express those words in the most beautiful and attractive manner.

"To convey the message our facial expression plays a great part in coloring our tone. It would be as absurd to have a perfectly blank facial expression to convey an intense idea and expect that idea to have its effect upon the audience as to say 'It's a lovely day,' with an expression of gloom or sadness. Poise of the entire body plays a great part in aiding the voice, and perfect relaxation and perfect ease are most desirable, for then the body is at the command of the speaker and his muscles will respond to the emotion he is portraying. This is only nature.

"Speech should be equal to song, for there is melody running through the speech of a well cultivated speaker. His time and rhythm should be perfect—as perfect in its way as the time and rhythm of the greatest opera singer. The speaker has a more difficult task than the singer, for he is obliged to compose his own melody while the singer has had his prepared by the composer, the notation arranged where the ritards, fortissimo, staccato, crescendo, diminuendo occur. Not so with the speaker.

The speaking voice is also limited in range and yet there must be no repetition of inflection or monotony of tone. Many speakers drop their voices at the end of their sentences, which prevents the last words from being distinctly heard. This is a grievous fault and grievously hath many an audience endured it' and one person will turn to another to inquire 'What did he say?' The reply invariably being 'I didn't understand that,' and while this conversation is going on, perhaps the very heart of the speaker's message has been lost to many because the end words were dropped and not understood.

"There is no excuse for an unpleasant, indistinct speaking voice for any one of average intelligence that can produce any tones at all; in fact, any one who ordinarily speaks the English language can cultivate an agreeable and distinct voice in a comparatively short time with proper training."

Three Openings for the Coming Week

MONDAY—At the Liberty Theater Billie Burke, after an absence of three years, returns to the spoken drama and will appear in "Caesar's Wife," by W. Somerset Maugham, which had a long run at the Royalty Theater, London. This is the star's first appearance under the direction of F. Ziegfeld, jr. "Caesar's Wife" is a modern play, in which the author points out the theory that love will follow respect and admiration, and shows that sturdy adherence to justice and law, regardless of consequences, is the backbone of the Anglo-Saxon race. The three acts take place in Cairo. The piece was staged by B. Iden Payne. The company appearing with Miss Burke is headed by Norman Trevor, while Ernest Glendenning, Hilda Spong, Margaret Dale, Mrs. Tom A. Wise, Frederic De Belleville, T. Wigney Percyval and Harry Green are also in the cast.

TUESDAY—At the Lyric Theater F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest will present a new Chinese musical romance, "The Rose of China," by Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse. The music is by a new composer, Armand Vecsey. The company includes Frank MacIntyre, Oscar Shaw, Cecil Cunningham and Jane Richardson. Julian Mitchell staged the dances and ensembles. The dramatic action has been directed by Robert Milton.

At the Garrick Theater the New York Theater Guild will present "The Rise of Silas Lapham," based on William Dean Howells's novel of that name. It is a costume play of the period of 1875. This will mark the reappearance on the New York stage, after a long absence, of James K. Hackett, who will play Silas Lapham. Mr. Hackett is the first visiting star to play with the Guild. The dramatization was made by Lillian Sabine, of Washington. Helen Westley will be seen as Mrs. Bromfield Corey, a Boston society leader, and Grace Henderson, Marjorie Vonnegut, Grace Knell, Henry Stillman and Noel Leslie are also in the cast. The play is produced under the direction of Philip Moeller.

Bobby Watson, a He-Man, Finds It No Easy Task To Play Madame Lucy

Wonder what a regular he-man thinks about when he is obliged to play the part of a sissy!

That conjecture must have arisen in the minds of many of those who have seen Bobbie Watson in the rôle of Madame Lucy, the comedy character of "Irene," the new musical comedy now at the Vanderbilt Theater.

Bobbie Watson awoke to find himself famous last Wednesday after the first-nighters had discovered in him a real comedian. All his life he had been trying to convince Broadway that he was really good, but things never "broke quite right." When "Going Up" was presented on Forty-second Street it was Frank Craven who walked away with the honors, although Watson played the very same part in the company that toured the South and West.

But Wednesday he had arrived. His wife was proud of him. His friends were congratulating him. All the theatrical world knew who Bobbie Watson was. In his dressing-room Wednesday night he was opening his mail while awaiting his cue to go on. Here was the address on a letter from a photographer:

"Robbie Watson, Vanderbilt Theater.

"My dear Miss Watson."

Such is fame. Here he was congratulating himself on being known wherever New York newspapers circulated, and yet a theatrical photographer thought he was a woman just because he was playing an effeminate part and the program scheduled him is Madame Lucy.

It is not a pleasant rôle Watson has assumed. As a matter of fact, eight men rehearsed the part and then decided not to play it. Then Watson was suggested. A friend of his had seen him do old men as well as juveniles, and was sure he could play an effeminate part as well. And so Watson rehearsed three weeks before "Irene" opened in Washington.

"The first night in Washington I was a little shaky," he said. "I was afraid the audience wouldn't understand I was not really a sissy. But the second night I felt that I was not being misunderstood.

"I don't mind playing the part as long as I can convince the audience that I am not really effeminate. If I could not do that I should refuse to act as Madame Lucy.

"It is really the most difficult part in the world to play and still convince your audience that you are a man. I believe in trying anything once, and now I am mighty glad that I accepted this part, distasteful though it seemed to me at the beginning."

Watson got his start with a medicine show, in which he used to play seven characters for $10 a week. Since then he has had his fling at vaudeville, burlesque, cabarets and musical comedy. His last previous engagement was in "Just a Minute."

Emanuel Reicher

By Rebecca Drucker

IT IS an example of our talent for conspicuous waste that we have failed to make use of the genius of Emanuel Reicher in our English-speaking theater, leaving it to an unknown group in the obscure Yiddish theater to give him the materials he needs to work with. What otherwise should have been a small insurgent movement of no more than local significance has become, through the authority of his direction, a vigorous and illuminating artistic experiment.

The Jewish Art Theater has grown out of the dissent of a small body within the Yiddish theater against the native limitations of the Yiddish stage. It is an attempt to relate the Yiddish theater to the general body of modern culture. Scattered throughout the eight theaters that make up the Yiddish-speaking stage in this city there were younger Yiddish playwrights who wished to give a wider significance to folk-drama than the popular colloquial expressions permitted, and actors who desired to bring into the theater the figures of modern European dramatists. Under Reicher's direction they have made four productions, none of them without distinction, and two of them of quite extraordinary skill and beauty.

It is impossible to overestimate what Reicher has contributed toward making "The Idle Inn" and "The Dumb Messiah" two of the most remarkable examples of modern producing that New York has ever seen. He has handled the materials of stagecraft, of the plays and of acting with a magnificent intelligence and skill; he has built them in noble proportions against a background of wide and cultivated perceptions. He has underlaid them with a true emotional force and understanding.

Inevitably the direct significance of the Jewish Art Theater must be limited. It is, however, bound to be a powerful influence on that minority of the English-speaking theater which represents a similar discontent. What might an American art theater come to under such leadership as Reicher's?

If minorities are usually led by such men as Reicher it is easy to understand why they are powerful. He looks as though he had been hewn out of something firm and very durable. He seems impelled by a powerful and dynamic imagination. There is a mental and physical force in the man that seems to call for heavy impacts.

Reicher is sixty years old. For forty years abroad and here he has broken ground for the modern spirit in the theater. He was a pioneer, perhaps the leading one, of realism in the Continental Theater. He flung a gibe at romantic acting before naturalism in acting had so much as become a formulated creed.

Reicher was born in Cracow, Poland. The Russian milieu permitted the Jew no place in the real life of the country, and the orthodox Jewish milieu was too narrow to hold him. He moved to Germany, and there, in the eighties, he became an actor of national reputation. It was the time of the awakening of modern culture, and Reicher longed eagerly to express it in the theater.

By the light of Ibsen, which was then rising, he saw a new future for the theater. The blank amazement and hostility with which the first productions of Ibsen were received served only as a challenge to him. He had a natural taste for going against the current. When he saw Ibsen accepted and finally revered, he did not cease to be of the dissenting minority. A whole world of new conceptions in art lay open, and the work of the pioneer had only begun. There were still Hauptmann and Strindberg and a host of other Continental dramatists to champion. A new and revolutionary creed of stagecraft was developing and the classics were being rediscovered in the modern spirit. This adventuring has kept Reicher a poor man, but it has doubtless repaid him in other satisfactions. He has seen the work of Stanislawski and Reinhardt come to fruition on ground that he prepared.

"In Europe you can be a poor man and still have great prestige as an artist," he said. "Here that is impossible. Your artistic achievement is measured also by money, and if his work does not earn that it does not command respect. I do not know whether it would be wise for an artist to do here what I and so many others have done there.

"The Modern Theater is a spirit, not a definition of purpose. It is not devoted to modern plays, nor even to national drama. Only a small proportion of the plays produced in the Moscow Art Theater are Russian. Reinhardt produces comparatively few German plays, and the Comédie Française does not limit its productions to the French. The modern theater should shelter all the great plays of the world, classic and modern. It should be open to all the culture of the world. It should hold steadfastly to what is universal. That is its strength as an instrument of civilization."

In 1899 Reicher came to this country and put on the first production of "Ghosts" ever seen here. The performance was given at Carnegie Lyceum, and in the cast were Mary Shaw, Reicher and Joan Blair. When Reicher returned he left his son, Frank, who has remained in this country ever since.

Seven years ago Reicher came here to live. In a remote way Pinski's play "The Dumb Messiah" which was produced here at the Jewish Art Theater last week, was responsible for his coming. Reicher was anxious to be reunited with his children, Frank and Hedwig Reicher, who were acting in this country. David Pinski, whose play, "The Treasure," had just been produced at Reinhardt's Theater, heard of his wish to go with great enthusiasm. "I shall write a play in which you and Hedwig and Frank can appear, and you shall play it in New York." A little later he returned with the manuscript. "But how shall I play in English," said Reicher, "when my English is so poor?" "You can play it in any language," said Pinski, triumphantly. "The part I have written you is that of a dumb man."

The English-speaking stage has seen two flashes of Reicher's genius—the unforgettable productions of "The Weavers and "John Gabriel Bjorkman." They were the beginnings of a courageous hope he had of establishing an American art theater. But the loss with which he was faced by these two performances forced him to temporarily suspend the idea of such a single-handed undertaking. He still owes a small number of subscribers five performances to complete the projected series of seven. It is a debt of honor that he regards himself bound to fulfill, and one is unscrupulously glad of this mortgage which the American public still holds on him.

These unheralded productions at the Jewish Art Theater open a wide vista before the American theater. We have our own talented producers, but the sophistication and wisdom that gives these few productions symmetry and force is something that is not in the stuff of our culture. We must in our theater, as in other forms of art, find universal culture before transmuting it into something distinctively American.

There are colossal rhythms in civilization that take centuries for their completion and that are written across the world. In the strophe the old world discovered America, and now on the anti-strophe America is finding the rest of the world. No painted Indians or virgin forests hold a more thrilling adventure than this discovery of old truths to young America.

To-night at The Neighborhood

The Neighborhood Players will be seen in "The Queen's Enemies" and "A Night at an Inn," by Lord Dunsany, and the Festival Dancers and the Balalaika Orchestra also will appear in a program of Russian dances and music. For the following week and Saturday evening, November 29, "A Sunny Morning," by J. and S. Alvarez Quintero, will be substituted for "A Night at an Inn," and on Sunday, November 30, the bill will be the same as to-night.

Lorraine Manville and Teddy Sullivan at the Riviera